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John Henderson (trans.), *Plautus, Asinaria, The One about the Asses*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. Pp. 252. ISBN 0-299-21994-1. \$19.95 (pb).

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After decades of relative neglect, the archaic Roman comic poet Plautus seems to have become popular again. His plays are receiving attention from literary scholars and historians alike, and new translations and editions are regularly appearing in print.

A fine example is the new, exciting version of the *Asinaria* by John Henderson, whose latest books include studies of Pliny the Younger, Roman gardening, fables and Seneca.¹ It is one thing to develop theories on Latin texts, but quite another one to actually render them word for word and comment upon even their most technical aspects. Henderson has proved to be influential as a theoretician, and his idiosyncratic approach to Latin literature has inspired many Anglophone classicists. I readily admit that I do not belong to his devotees, but his *Asinaria* proves his talents as a translator and his discipline as a philologist. The first half of the book will command respect even from more traditional classicists.

After a short preface and one or two pages preparing for Plautus' prologue, H. opens directly with the complete Latin and English texts of the play on facing pages (pp.4-101). Next comes a technical section, with a list explaining Plautine language and vocabulary including some remarks about English slang words (p.105-116), an outline of the metres (pp.117-120), and a list of textual differences compared with other editions (pp.121-122).

The second main part of the book (pp.123-215) is devoted to 'commentary and analysis' in five chapters with such names as 'Killing the plot', 'Funny money', 'American Beauty' and 'Rotten rhetorics'. Notes, bibliography and indexes conclude the volume (pp.217-252). Those who are familiar with H.'s work will know what to expect here, but for those who are not, a warning may be in order. H.'s style does not allow for easy reading, particularly for non-native speakers of English. His texts bristle with ideas and associations, many of them inspired by the English language itself, but a reader looking for factual information will often be left empty-handed. Those who are willing to follow H.'s thoughts will find much to ponder. Most of all, they will be drawn into the social dynamics and the humour of the play: H. convincingly shows that Plautus can actually be very lively and funny.

In the remainder of this review, I will restrict myself to some remarks and observations on the first half of the book, in which H. has had to show his 'philological' side. It is, I think, the most valuable part of the book, for classical students and teachers alike.

I found it refreshing that the book does not have a proper introduction. A Plautine comedy usually does not require a lengthy preparation: if the Romans could readily understand it, why should it be different for us? Now the reader is really taken *in medias res* into this amusing play.

A word must be said on the Latin text. H. has chosen to give it a highly unusual, technical look, by adding signs for short vowels and for synezesis, by printing elided syllables in superscript, and by adding a dot under every syllable that carries the ictus. Additional symbols refer to persons entering or leaving the stage. The result is useful for readers less familiar with Plautine metrics, but the Latin now looks like a pattern of horrific mathematical formulas or the work of a typesetting machine with serious technical problems. The use of an old English typeface on some pages of the translation (p.81-85) does not make things any calmer or more classical.

The translation is highly modern and lively. But as in the commentary, H.'s command of English is such that much of the text will be difficult to follow for non-English readers. I have to admit that the strongly colloquial flavour of the translation often forced me to consult other translations (such as the now generally despised Loeb translation by Nixon) or the Latin original, to find out what the text was actually saying. This may be due to my lack of familiarity with everyday spoken English, but I assume many readers all over the world will experience similar problems. To pick out one important characteristic: H. employs many sentences, often short ones, that do not have a finite verb. This occasionally works fine, but it can easily become tiresome and does not allow the reader enough to hold on to. But I suppose all this will be less problematic for readers in the UK, and, if these form H.'s target group, I should perhaps withhold my complaints.

H.'s approach as a translator strongly reminded me of what Amy Richlin does in her recent translation of three Plautine comedies (*Curculio*, *Persa*, and *Poenulus*). In my review of that book for BMCR ([2006.05.35](http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2006/05.35)), I commented that it is perfectly all right to translate in such a way in order to serve a specific target group, say the educated, academic, middle-aged UK reader of classical languages, in early 2006, who also knows all about film, modern literature and British society. But if the user of the book happens to belong to another group or another period, much of the translation will become quite inaccessible: jokes become unclear, hints and allusions remain obscure or unnoticed, slang words present insurmountable problems (what normal dictionary will offer help?). Such a translation, then, can be of immense value in bringing the ancient text to life, but only for a very small audience, and it is also bound to get out of date within a short time.

I think H.'s translation, brilliant as it is, runs much the same risk as that of Richlin. On the other hand, it may be added that his book as a whole can be considered an improvement on hers. While Richlin offered merely a translation, she nonetheless felt obliged to equip it with various sorts of explanatory material, literally surrounding the text with long introductions and numerous, obtrusive notes (even entering upon problems in the Latin or the original metre, although the Latin text was not included in her volume). H. leaves readers to decide for themselves: those who wish to study the Latin original are given useful tools; those who just want to read the translation can do so without being disturbed by notes; and those who wish to follow H.'s observations and word play may comfortably skip the translation and go to the second part of the volume.

To sum up, H. has produced a lively and provocative edition of the *Asinaria*, that has both the merits and hazards of a postmodern book. It will bring Plautus and his play very much nearer to those readers who can follow H.'s words and thoughts. But on a global scale, such readers may form a relatively limited group. Fortunately, even for a larger audience, H.'s book still has something to offer, notably in its more technical sections: the Latin text, parts of the translation, and the added material on metre and vocabulary.

It would perhaps be unwise to leave students with just this book to study Plautus' play, but, in combination with a more traditional edition, it may well inspire them to ask relevant questions and start thinking about the old Roman plays within their own context and culture. That is, it must be said, not the smallest effect a book can have. In that sense, H.'s *Asinaria* is to be welcomed by scholars and students. Even outside the UK and in years to come.

Notes:

[1.](#) Some of these studies have been reviewed in BMCR: [2002.10.16](#), [2005.05.22](#), [2006.11.40](#).

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